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The 'Conditional Position Problem' for epistemic externalism

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Abstract In this paper, I develop a problem I call the "Conditional Position Problem" that arises for Ernest Sosa's externalist epistemology. The problem is that, due to a phenomenon of epistemic circularity, one is unable to attain the reflective knowledge that one is justified in believing that perception is reliable, and is confined to the merely conditional position that one is so justified *if* perception is reliable. The problem is similar but different from a problem that Barry Stroud has tried to formulate. However, because of space limitations I cannot explain in detail what makes the two problems different. The structure of the paper is as follows: first, I explain the structural features of Sosa's epistemology that allow the problem to arise; I also describe the normative task that is thwarted by the Conditional Position Problem; then I expound the problem itself. I proceed to examine one response that Sosa can give based on a simple inferential manoeuvre and explain why that response fails; then I examine another response he can give based on a complex form of self-support, and explain why this response also fails. I conclude explaining why the problem I present is specifically a problem for externalism. In an appendix, I very briefly describe what I take to be the main reason that justifies my claim that Stroud's problem is not the same as the problem I develop.

Keywords Ernest Sosa's epistemology · Epistemic externalism · Reflective knowledge · Reliability of perception · Conditional Position Problem

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1 Introduction

A classical epistemology seeks to provide conditions that a belief has to fulfil in order
to instantiate a positive epistemic property or standing, for example *being knowledge*
or *being justified*. Many philosophers engaged in such theorising, however, also pursue
the project of showing that those conditions are indeed fulfilled by ample categories
of beliefs. They not only seek to elucidate the various types of positive epistemic
properties, but also to show that, so elucidated, they have actual instances. We can say
that the elucidation of normative vocabulary belongs to the *meta-theory* of the field in
question, while the question of which items actually fall under the terms elucidated
belongs to the *normative theory* of that field.[1] A classical epistemology is composed
of a meta-theory of epistemic vocabulary and a corresponding normative theory.

Ernest Sosa's version of Performance Epistemology is a classical epistemology in
the above sense; it is also an *externalist* epistemology in that his meta-theory defines
some positive epistemic properties whose instantiation obey the following principles:

> (I) A *necessary* condition for their instantiation is that the beliefs that have them
> in fact come from a *reliable* competence.
> (II) The satisfaction of a *second-order epistemic requirement*-like knowing that
> the belief comes from a reliable competence-is *unnecessary* for their instantia-
> tion.

Here are some passages where Sosa defines knowledge and justification in general as
obeying principle (I):

> A belief amount to knowledge only if it is true and its correctness derives from its
> manifesting certain cognitive virtues of the subject, where nothing is a cognitive
> virtue unless it is a *truth-conducive* disposition (2009, p. 136. My emphasis).

> When a belief is epistemically justified, that is because it comes from an epistem-
> ically, *truth-conducively reliable* process or faculty or intellectual virtue (2003,
> p. 109. My emphasis).

And here is a passage where he defines a type of knowledge that obeys principle (II):

> [Let's] …understand "animal" knowledge as requiring apt belief *without requir-
> ing defensibly* apt belief, i.e. apt belief that the subject aptly believes to be apt…
> (2007, p. 24. His emphasis)

Sosa calls the epistemic standings that obey principle (II) "animal"; however, his
meta-theory also defines some epistemic standings whose instantiation requires the
satisfaction of a second-order epistemic requirement, and hence violate principle (II),
he calls them "reflective", and they are very important in his overall view of human
cognition. But what makes his epistemology externalist is that it recognizes *some*
epistemic standings that obey (I) and (II).

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[1] For a similar conception of the differnece between the meta-theory and the normative theory of a given
field, see Fumerton (1995, pp.1–3).

I will assume that Sosa's meta-theory is correct, i.e. that his definitions of epistemic properties or standings are correct. In this paper, I want to articulate a problem that doesn't concern the correctness of Sosa's meta-theory, but his normative aims of showing that the epistemic standings he defines are actually instantiated.

I think the problem I will articulate can be generalized to other classical externalist epistemologies, but I will focus here exclusively on how it arises for Sosa's. There is an important caveat to make. In several of his writings, Barry Stroud has tried to articulate a problem whose formulation makes it sound similar to the problem I will describe,[2] and Sosa has explicitly responded to Stroud's problem.[3] Given the way Stroud characterizes his problem I believe there are strong reasons to think that it is *not* the same as the one I will formulate. However, due to space limits I cannot explain here the differences between the two problems; I also lack the space to examine whether Sosa's direct responses to Stroud can be adapted to be effective responses to my problem; my conviction is that they can't, but showing this will need many pages, which I don't have here.[4] What I will do is to concentrate on developing the problem that I see and then examine a couple of responses to that problem that can be assembled from Sosa's views. Examining those responses and understanding why they fail will help appreciate the recalcitrance of the problem.

2 The normative task

Let's pick one epistemic standing, say *knowledge*. Given Sosa's externalist meta-theory, a necessary condition for a belief to amount to knowledge is that it manifests a reliable cognitive competence. This means that to carry out the normative task of showing that some beliefs are instances of knowledge one must show that the competences manifested in them are reliable.

With respect to how we can investigate their reliability, there are two types of cognitive competences:

A. Cognitive competences whose reliability can be investigated using other competences.
B. Cognitive competences whose reliability can be investigated only through themselves.

Mary's arithmetical competences to sum, subtract, divide, etc., are competences of type A because in assessing their reliability we are not forced to use those very same competences of Mary; we can use a source completely independent of Mary's arithmetical abilities, for example a calculator. When we are dealing with competences of type A, the normative task of showing that they are reliable, and hence that the beliefs they produce can amount to knowledge, will seem to be unproblematic: we only need to use an independent competence or source to carry out the task. However, the com-

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[2] See Stroud (1989, 1994, 2004).

[3] See, for example, his 2004 and chapters 8 and 9 of his 2009.

[4] In the Appendix at the end of the paper, I very briefly describe what I take to be the main reason that justifies my claim that Stroud's problem is not the same as the problem I develop in the present paper.

petences that are the central concern of Sosa and many other epistemologists are *not* of type A, but those of type B, because they think such competences are especially fundamental or basic in the architecture of human cognition. Those competences comprise faculties like perception, deduction, induction and memory, and unlike type-A competences, in assessing the reliability of a type-B competence we have no option but to use that very same competence. As James Van Cleve puts it:

> One cannot help but think it relevant that in the case of [a specific type-A competence] there is the possibility of making independent checks…. In the case of an ultimate source of knowledge such as perception or memory, however, *there is no such possibility of an independent check* (and no hope for support except self-support)…. (2003, p. 57. My emphasis).

Competences of type B are indeed central to Sosa's epistemology. In commenting on the structural similarities between his epistemology and Descartes', he points out that his improves on Descartes' in as much as it is more permissive as to the fundamental competences that it admits as sources of knowledge and justification, and those newly admitted competences are clearly of type B:

> Radical rationalism admits only (rational) intuition and deduction (along with memory) as its faculties of choice (or anyhow of top choice) and wishes to validate all certainty in terms of these faculties. Thus the Cartesian grand project. While broadening our focus beyond certainty to knowledge more broadly, virtue perspectivism admits also perception and introspection, along with intuition and deduction, as well as inductive and abductive reasoning (2009, p. 194).

This means that taking on the normative task of showing that type-B competences are reliable is compulsory for Sosa, for the simple reason that he regards those type-B competences as sources of knowledge and given his meta-theory they are sources of knowledge only if they are reliable; therefore, he must show that they are reliable, otherwise his conviction that they are sources of knowledge will lack justification.

I'm going to split the normative task of showing that a type-B competence is reliable into two stages:

> *First-order stage* This stage is carried out by producing a *justification* for the claim that the targeted type-B competence is reliable.

> *Second-order stage* This stage is carried out by producing a *defence of the justification* produced in the first-order stage of the task.

Some might think that only the first-order stage deserves the description "showing that the competence is reliable"; the second-order stage seems to refer to an achievement that is unnecessary for showing *that*. My reason for making the second-order stage part of the normative task is fundamentally that the *showing* in question is a *philosophical* showing. The individual who believes that has carried out the first-order stage of the task successfully, and therefore believes that he has a justification for believing that the targeted type-B competence is reliable, is a philosopher. He thinks he has this justification in the context where he uses that reliability claim to explain how some instances of perceptual beliefs are justified or amount to knowledge. This philosopher

is aware, as anybody working in the profession is, that he must be able not only to *display* what he believes is his justification to believe the *explanans* he is using, but also to *defend* that justification. This is because it often happens in philosophy that the target of an opponent may well be not so much the *explanans* one is using, but rather what one takes to be *one's justification for it*. This means that one must be prepared to defend, not only the *explanans* one is endorsing -the relevant reliability claim, in the present case-, but also one's justification for endorsing it. Given the dialectical nature of philosophy, one has not really succeeded in showing that p if one is not able to satisfactorily defend one's justification for p; without this second-order capacity one will not be able to fully engage in the dialectical practice of philosophy. We will see in the next section what the defence of our theorist's justification for the reliability claim amounts to, here I only wanted to indicate the motivation to make of such a second-order affair a constitutive stage of the normative task.

The obstacle I want to present to Sosa's normative task arises out of the non-eliminable circularity involved in trying to show that a type-B competence is reliable; it is the circularity of having to use a competence to argue for its own reliability. Some of the epistemic vices that have been associated with this form of circularity have been thought to arise in the first-order stage of the normative task,[5] but the problem I will formulate arises in the second-order stage of the task. I will not discuss the vices that have been thought to affect the first-order stage, nor the various diagnoses of them that have been proposed; these issues have been amply discussed in the relevant literature. My arguments will proceed as if we could grant that the circularity in question did not produce a fatal vice in carrying out the first-order stage of the normative task; then I will show that, even under that benevolent assumption, it does produce a fatal vice in carrying out the second-order stage of the task. I want to emphasise that the benevolent assumption concerning the first-order stage is purely procedural and temporary: I make it just to be able to move on to the second-order stage to see if this stage can be carried out successfully. After we find out that the second-order stage cannot be carried out successfully, we will have to come back (in Sect. 4) to revise the benevolent assumption concerning the first-order stage.

3 The Conditional Position Problem

The most natural device the externalist can use to carry out the first-order stage of the normative task is a track-record argument ("TRA", hereafter) for the reliability of the targeted competence; let's pick perception as our working example of type-B competence:

1. At t_1, S_1 formed the perceptual belief that p_1, and p_1.
2. At t_2, S_1 formed the perceptual belief that p_2, and p_2.
3. At t_3, S_1 formed the perceptual belief that p_3, and p_3.
   ……………………………………

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[5] For example, the problem of "easy knowledge" (Cohen 2002) and the problem of transmission-failure (Wright 2002), are vices that *would* arise in what I'm calling the first-order stage of the task.

(R) Therefore, sense perception is a truth-reliable cognitive competence.[6]

Each of the premises of (TRA) consists of a conjunction; the first conjunct ascribes the formation through perceptual means of a belief p to a subject S, the second asserts the content p of that belief. If the argument is run in the first-person then we can assume that the justification for the first conjunct of each premise is a piece of authoritative self-knowledge; if the argument is not run in the first-person then we can assume that the justification for the first conjunct is some kind of behavioural evidence of the subject of the ascription. On the first assumption, the justification for the first conjunct is not essentially perceptual, on the second assumption it is. But regardless of whether the argument is run in the first-person or not the justification for the second conjunct of each premise is bound to be perceptual.[7] It is the essentially perceptual nature of *this* justification that makes a (TRA) for the reliability of perception *epistemically circular*: to argue for the reliability of perception one necessarily must use perception to justify the premises of the argument.

This broad conception of epistemic circularity can be cashed out in different ways. For example, according to one account that derives from Crispin Wright's views on transmission of warrant,[8] the epistemic circularity of (TRA) would consist in the fact that having an antecedent warrant for the conclusion that perception is reliable is

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[6] There are a couple of issues concerning the reliability of a cognitive competence that need a comment. First, Sosa conceives a competence as "a disposition to succeed reliably enough when one tries" (2016, p. 26), so a cognitive competence is a disposition to form true beliefs reliably enough when one tries. Two questions about such cognitive dispositions must be distinguished: one is *what constitutes* their reliability, another is *how we know* that they are reliable. Sosa has a sophisticated account of the structure of competences, that he calls the SSS-structure (see, for example, his 2016, pp. 26–29), which helps explain why they are reliable, when they are. In this paper I will not address these interesting issues about what constitutes the reliability of cognitive competences; I will be discussing only the issue of how we know that they are reliable. Second, concerning this purely epistemological issue, there is another comment to make. The notion of reliability can be interpreted in statistical or inductive terms, and in counterfactual terms; on the first interpretation, a cognitive competence is reliable when, on average, it produces sufficiently more true than false beliefs, on the second interpretation it is reliable when not easily would it lead to false beliefs. The two notions are not equivalent: a cognitive competence may have a perfect record delivering true beliefs because it has always been exercised in a very narrow set of circumstances; yet it might be counterfactually very fragile, for in slightly different circumstances it would easily yield a false belief. Because of the non-equivalence of the two notions, evidence for the statistical reliability of a competence (like that supplied by (TRA)) does not necessarily count as evidence for its counterfactual reliability. In order to make evidence for the statistical reliability of a competence count as evidence for its counterfactual reliability, that evidence must be collected from a relevantly varied sample. I believe that Sosa has conceived of reliability in both ways, hence I will assume relevant variety with respect to the evidence supplied by the premises of (TRA), in order to make it count as evidence for the reliability of perception regardless of whether it is interpreted statistically or counterfactually.

[7] In line with the assumption of relevant variety in evidence, pointed out in the previous footnote, we have to assume that each premise of (TRA) alludes to perceptual circumstances that are relevantly varied. Another important point concerning the premises of (TRA) is that the perceptual state that justifies the second conjunct of a given premise *has to be different* from the perceptual state that leads to the formation of the belief reported in the first conjunct of that premise, for if one and the same perceptual state plays both roles, (TRA) immediately becomes an example of "easy knowledge". When the argument is run in the third-person this automatically ensures that the states will be different, because the state that leads to the formation of the belief reported in the first conjunct of a premise belongs to a person other than oneself, while the state that justifies the second conjunct belongs to oneself.

[8] See for instance Wright (2002).

a necessary condition for perception to give us justification for the premises of the argument. But this account of the circularity of (TRA) would not be accepted by our externalist theorist, for his externalist principles (I) and (II) from Sect. 1 entail that what is necessary for perception to give us justification for the premises of (TRA), is not that we have *an antecedent warrant* for (TRA)'s conclusion, but simply *the truth* of that conclusion.

I will understand the epistemic circularity of (TRA) in terms such that the externalist will accept that it is present in (TRA): the truth of the conclusion is necessary for the justification of the premises. As just noted, his principles in fact commit the externalist to accept that (TRA) exhibits this form of epistemic circularity.[9] Hereafter, whenever I talk of "epistemic circularity" I will mean this simple form that the externalist is committed to attribute to (TRA). My aim is to show that this simple circular dependence of the justification for the premises of (TRA) on the truth of its conclusion is sufficient to frustrate the normative task and hence is epistemically vicious.[10]

As I anticipated at the end of last section, we will proceed as if the epistemic circularity of (TRA) didn't produce a fatal vice at the first-order stage of normative task. In the second-order stage of the task a defence of the alleged justification provided by (TRA) must be articulated. Such defence can acquire multiple and sophisticated forms, but I want to focus on what may be regarded as the most minimal form of defence of that justification, whereby one shows that one's justification fulfils the conditions that *one's own* meta-theory validates as the conditions for such justification. This would be a minimal defence of one's justification because the minimum one can show in showing that one is indeed justified is that what one takes as one's justification counts as such by one's own lights. Despite its minimality, the problem I want to describe arises in carrying out in this minimal way the second-order stage of the normative task.

What are the necessary and sufficient conditions that externalism says (TRA) must fulfil to provide justification for its conclusion? Whatever that set of conditions turns out to be, one of them will be that our externalist theorist is justified in believing (TRA)'s premises, for this is a necessary condition for *any* argument to provide justification for its conclusion. As we have seen, (TRA)'s premises have two conjuncts of which the second is justified unavoidably through perception. Given that the externalist meta-theory says that reliability of a manifested competence is necessary for the justification of the belief brought about through that competence, it follows that for our theorist to be justified in believing the second conjunct of (TRA)'s premises it is *necessary* that (R) is the case. Therefore, (R) is a necessary condition for him to

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[9] Note that in order for (TRA) to exhibit this form of circularity, it is not enough that one *has to* use perception to argue for its own reliability, i.e. that perception is a type-B competence; it is also necessary that one endorses the externalist tenet (I): that a necessary condition for perception to provide justification is that it is reliable. In Sect. 6 below I explain how an internalist who drops that tenet of externalism, will not face epistemic circularity in carrying out his own normative task, and how, for him, (TRA) itself would not exhibit epistemic circularity.

[10] Pryor (2004, pp. 358–359), argues that this simple form of epistemic circularity is not vicious, he gives a couple of examples of arguments that exhibit it but intuitively seem epistemically fine. I lack the space here to discuss the peculiarities of Pryor's examples; I only want to point out that what my arguments in this paper aim for is to show that this form of epistemic circularity produces a crippling vice *for the normative project carried out by the externalist*. Whether that form of epistemic circularity is *always* vicious, regardless of the intellectual project where it occurs, is a question that would require more investigation.

be justified in believing the premises of (TRA) and hence a necessary condition for (TRA) to provide justification for its conclusion. I want to assume that our theorist is in a very *optimal* situation with respect to *any other* condition in the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for (TRA) to confer justification on its conclusion, i.e. I will assume that (TRA) fulfils *all those other* conditions and that he succeeds in showing that it does. Under this assumption of optimality all he needs to do to complete his task of showing that (TRA) fulfils the conditions to give justification for its conclusion is to show that (R) is the case. In other words, in the situation of optimality he knows that:

(CP) *If* (R) then (TRA) gives one justification to believe (R).

He knows that, given that (TRA) fulfils all the *other* conditions to deliver justification, it will be sufficient that (R) obtains for (TRA) to actually give him justification to believe its conclusion. Therefore, he knows that all he must do to move past from his knowledge of the conditional (CP) to the knowledge of its consequent is to show that (R) is the case.

The situation he's reached is one where he is aware that his knowledge that (TRA) gives him justification to believe (R) is conditional on his knowing (R). Therefore, our theorist must ask whether he knows (R). Given that his way of coming to know (R) is (TRA) itself, his answer must be that in order to know (R), (TRA) at least has to give him justification to believe (R). But this answer sends him back to the question whether (TRA) indeed gives him justification to believe (R), which is the question he is pursuing in the second-order stage of the normative task, and he already knows the answer to it: (TRA) gives him justification to believe (R) *if* (R), which is (CP) again. Hence, our theorist's attempt to get past the conditional position described by (CP) and get into the categorical position of affirming the consequent of (CP), inevitably sends him back to the same conditional position. I call the impossibility of getting past this conditional position "The Conditional Position Problem". It is a problem that thwarts the second-order stage of the normative task: in trying to get into a position where he is able to defend his justification for (R), the externalist cannot achieve the very minimum of showing that what he takes to be his justification for (R) fulfils what, by his own lights, are the conditions for such justification.

When the externalist uses (TRA) as a natural way to argue for (R), undoubtedly he *believes* that (TRA) gives him justification to believe (R). But we have seen that the dialectical nature of philosophy makes it compulsory for our theorist to embark in the task of converting the second-order *belief* that (TRA) gives him justification to believe (R), into second-order *knowledge* that (TRA) gives him justification to believe (R). This conversion is to be executed by showing, and thereby coming to know, that (TRA) fulfils the conditions to provide justification; only in possession of that second-order knowledge will he be able to defend his justification for (R). But the attempt to bring about that epistemic ascent lands our theorist in the conditional position described by (CP), that he cannot get past. The fact that our theorist is trapped in that conditional position means that he cannot attain the second-order knowledge of the categorical proposition that (TRA) gives him justification to believe (R), and this lack disables him from fully engaging in the dialectical practice of philosophy. For the externalist wants to use (R) as the *explanans* for perceptual knowledge and justification, and in

philosophy a theorist who uses an *explanans* X must be prepared to show that his justification for X is really such. But if the task of showing that lands him in the insurmountable position that his grounds justify him in believing X *if* X is indeed the case, he is clearly in a completely inapt position to defend his justification for X.

Sosa tells us to imagine that

> …one asks oneself…. "Am I justified in taking this to be white and round?" and one has to answer "Definitely not" or even "Who knows?….. Maybe I'm justified, maybe I'm not." In that case one *automatically* falls short, one has attained only some lesser epistemic status, and not any "real, or enlightened, or reflective" knowledge. The latter requires some awareness of the status of one's belief, some ability to answer that one…. is epistemically justified, and some ability to defend this through the reliability of one's relevant faculties… (2009, p. 153, his emphasis).

A third type of "lesser" answer would be: "Yes, I am justified in believing that it is white and round, *if* it is white and round". This answer would also be a way of failing to attain the reflective knowledge in question, and will also have the detrimental effects of the other two: It would be an obstacle to *reach* the categorical answer one wants and to one's ability to *defend* that categorical answer.

I've argued that Sosa should give an answer with the same disappointing conditional structure to the question "Am I justified -by (TRA)- in believing that (R)?" The conditional answer: "Yes, I am justified -by (TRA)- in believing that (R), *if* (R)" is a way of failing to know that "I am justified -by (TRA)- to believe (R)"; and this failure of reflective knowledge also has the disabling effects that Sosa points out with respect to the other disappointing answers. But in this case, such effects have the philosophical import of disabling the theorist confined to give that conditional answer from fully engaging in the dialectical practice of philosophy.

4 The inferential availability of (R)

In describing the Conditional Position Problem, I said that our theorist reaches a position where he knows the conditional:

(CP) *If* (R) then (TRA) gives one justification to believe (R).

I pointed out that he is then aware that his knowledge of the consequent is conditional on his knowing the antecedent and, therefore, that he must ask himself *whether he knows* the antecedent and his attempt to answer this question traps him in the Conditional Position Problem.

But it might be replied: why should he ask himself whether he *knows (R)*? Wouldn't it be enough for him to ask if *(R) is true*? Given that I've been operating under the assumption that (TRA) itself doesn't suffer from a fatal vice, he can, on the basis of (TRA), answer positively the question whether (R) is true and then use (R) and (CP) to conclude (CP)'s consequent, via a simple *Modus Ponens*. In this way, the path to the Conditional Position Problem would seem to be avoided simply by asking *whether (R) is true*, instead of *whether he knows (R)*.

The Conditional Position Problem is a situation where the theorist is confined to wonder whether (TRA) gives him justification to believe (R). Responding to a similar problem Sosa holds that a simple *Modus Ponens*, like the one mentioned in the previous paragraph, should be enough to escape that type of situation:

> If our perceivers believe (a) that their perception, *if* reliable, yields them knowledge, and (b) that their perception *is* reliable, then why are they restricted to affirming only the conditional, *a*, and not its antecedent, *b*? Why must they *wonder whether* they understand their relevant knowledge? Indeed, to the extent that they are really convinced of *both a and b*, it would seem that, far from being logically constrained *to* wondering whether they know, they are, on the contrary, logically constrained *from* so wondering (2009, pp. 201–202, his emphasis).

I will call the envisaged way of avoiding the Conditional Position Problem "the *Modus Ponens* strategy". Does the *Modus Ponens* strategy work? In what follows I will argue that it does not.

In order for the *Modus Ponens* strategy to work, (R) must be inferentially available in the context where it is going to be used together with (CP). Now, recall what that context is: it is the context where the second-order stage of the normative task is pursued. In this context, the object of enquiry is whether the method used to arrive at (R) indeed fulfils the conditions for giving justification for believing (R). In other words, in this context the question concerning the epistemic credentials of the method used to arrive at (R) is *explicitly open,* it is the question that we want to answer. For brevity, I will call this context "the second-order context". I will explain why I think in this second-order context (R) is not available for inferential use.

When we base our belief that p on a reasoning, and we thereby take p as ready for use in further reasoning, we are *implicitly assuming* that the question concerning the epistemic credentials of the reasoning on which we base our belief that p is *positively closed*, i.e. we are assuming that the reasoning does give us justification to believe p. We can obtain evidence that such an implicit assumption is indeed operative when p is used as a premise for further reasoning, by bringing the issue explicitly to the consciousness of the reasoner. If we ask the subject who is using p as a premise in further reasoning: Do you think that your reasoning for p gives you justification for it?, he will be rationally compelled to answer: "yes", for if he answered "no", he would be rationally compelled to withdraw p as a premise available for inferential use, because it is irrational to use a premise that one regards oneself as not justified in holding. I think this is good evidence that when the reasoner uses p inferentially, he is implicitly assuming that his method of arriving at p does give him justification for p.

A particular case of that general phenomenon concerns the inferential use of (R) in the second-order context: given that (TRA) is the reasoning on which (R) is based, taking (R) to be ready for inferential use would require that our theorist makes the implicit assumption that (TRA) indeed fulfils the conditions for providing justification for (R). But such assumption regards as positively closed the question that is explicitly open in that second-order context, i.e. the question whether (TRA) fulfils the conditions

for providing justification for (R).[11] Hence, using (R) inferentially in the second-order context, where the question about the epistemic credentials of (TRA) is *explicitly open,* requires *implicitly assuming that that very same question is positively closed*. This is why our theorist cannot use (R) inferentially in the second-order context as the *Modus Ponens* strategy suggests: using it will plunge him in an incoherent context, one which requires him to assume as positively closed a question he is explicitly pursuing as open.

The preceding explanation of why (R) is not inferentially available in the second-order stage of the normative task, forces us to revise the assumption I made from the beginning to the effect that the first-order stage of the task does not suffer from a fatal vice. The revision is simply that the assumption is not true, because *the same type of problem* that makes (R) inferentially unavailable in the second-order context of answering the question "Does (TRA) fulfil the conditions to provide justification to believe (R)?", should also make the premises of (TRA) inferentially unavailable in the first-order context of answering the question "Is perception reliable?"

Given that the second conjunct in each premise of (TRA) is arrived at and justified through perception, when our theorist uses inferentially those premises he implicitly assumes that perception gives him justification to believe them. But according to his own theory, perception provides justification only if it is reliable. Hence, in assuming that perception gives him justification to believe the premises of (TRA), he is assuming that perception is reliable.[12] This means that using inferentially the premises of (TRA) in the first-order context of the normative task would require that our theorist makes the implicit assumption that perception is reliable. But such assumption regards as positively closed the question that is explicitly open in that first-order stage of the normative task, i.e. the question whether perception is reliable.[13] Hence, using inferentially the premises of (TRA) in that first-order context, where the question whether perception is reliable is *explicitly open,* requires *implicitly assuming that that very same question is positively closed*. This is why our theorist cannot use the premises of (TRA) in the first-order stage of the normative task: using them will plunge him

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[11] The externalist's meta-theory specifies the conditions (TRA) must fulfil in order to provide justification; the externalist has arguments for that meta-theory that are independent of what happens within the normative task, and so, when carrying out this task, the correctness of that meta-theory is *not* an open question. Hence it is important to emphasise that the question pursued as open in the second-order stage of the normative task is *not* whether the conditions specified by the meta-theory are indeed necessary for (TRA) to provide justification, but rather whether (TRA) indeed fulfils such conditions.

[12] Similarly, as before, we can obtain evidence that such an implicit assumption is indeed operative when he uses the premises of (TRA), by bringing the issue explicitly to his consciousness. If we ask him: Do you think that perception is reliable and hence justifies you in believing the premises of (TRA)?, he will be rationally compelled to answer: "yes", for if he answered "no", he would be rationally compelled to withdraw the premises of (TRA), because it is irrational to use premises that one regards oneself as not justified in holding.

[13] The externalist's meta-theory specifies the conditions that perception must fulfil in order to provide justification; one of such conditions is that perception is reliable. The externalist has arguments for that meta-theory that are independent of what happens within the normative task, and so, when carrying out this task, the correctness of that meta-theory is *not* an open question. Hence, it is important to emphasise that the question pursued as open in the first-order stage of the normative task is *not* whether reliability is indeed necessary for perception to provide justification, but rather whether perception is indeed reliable.

in an incoherent context, one which requires him to assume as positively closed the question he is explicitly pursuing as open.[14]

It looks like both stages of the normative task, the first-order and the second-order, are thwarted by the same kind of problem: each of them creates a context of enquiry whose implicit assumptions and explicit questions do not cohere. Contexts of enquiry must exhibit coherence between the questions regarded in them as open and the assumptions that a thinker must make in order to undertake the project of answering those questions. In using (R) inferentially in the second-order context, or the premises of (TRA) in the first-order context, our externalist theorist must make assumptions that positively close the questions he is explicitly pursuing as open, thereby creating an incoherence. A context of enquiry that exhibits such incoherence between its assumptions or presuppositions and its explicit questions, is not eligible for theoretical pursuit.

I think we can see this as the most basic problem that epistemic circularity produces for an externalist who wants to carry out the normative task. Before we get to the issues discussed in the imputation of transmission-failure or of easy knowledge, the most fundamental problem that ruins the normative task of the externalist concerns an incoherence in the very structure of the context where he has to carry out that task.

If the above is correct, what is the significance or importance of the Conditional Position Problem? If the fundamental problem with the normative task is that it creates first-order and second-order contexts of enquiry that are internally incoherent (in the sense described), why not leave its diagnosis there? I think the Conditional Position Problem does have a value: it represents the position we get trapped in if we ignore the structural problem in the context of the first-order stage of the normative task and go ahead to try to defend, in the second-order stage, the justification allegedly obtained for (R) in the first-order stage. As the dialectical unfolding of this paper shows, examining the attempt to avoid the Conditional Position Problem through a simple inferential move at the second-order stage, i.e. the "*Modus Ponens* strategy",

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[14] In the foregoing arguments, I've relied on the notions of a question "being explicitly pursued as open" and "being implicitly assumed as closed". In a fuller presentation of my arguments these notions should receive a more extended elucidation; but given that here I lack the space to do that I shall only bring together the intuitive points that support the use I make of those notions.

When I say that the questions: (1) "Is perception reliable?" and (2) "Does (TRA) fulfil the conditions for providing justification?" are explicitly pursued as open in the first-order and the second-order contexts, respectively, what I mean is that no particular answers to those questions have been *proven* or *justified*. What the externalist aims to do in each of those contexts is precisely to justify a positive answer to each of those questions. When I say that in using the premises of (TRA) to answer positively question (1) in the first-order context, the externalist implicitly assumes that the same question (1) is positively closed, what I mean is that in using inferentially those premises as steadfastly as he does, he is *proceeding as if* the positive answer to that very same question (1) had already been proven or justified. Similarly, when I say that in using (R) via the "Modus Ponens strategy" to answer positively question (2) in the second-order context, the externalist implicitly assumes that the same question (2) is positively closed, what I mean is that in using (R) inferentially as steadfastly as he does, he is *proceeding as if* the positive answer to that very same question (2) had already been proven or justified.

I think these descriptions of what is going on in the first-order and second-order contexts make it reasonably clear that, in each of them, the externalist is falling into the incoherence of implicitly assuming as positively *closed* (in the sense explained) the questions that he is explicitly pursuing as *open* (in the sense explained).

leads us to uncover the structural problem in the normative task, that we had ignored during its first-order stage. The Conditional Position Problem is something like a symptom that finally leads us to the deeper problem.

Up to this point my diagnosis of the normative task has been restricted to the supposition that the externalist uses (TRA) as the method to carry out the first-order stage of the task. But if there were a different method to carry it out, we would have to determine if it allows us to avoid the problems that we've encountered when using (TRA). Next section examines the prospects of a different, more sophisticated method.

5 The epistemic value of complex self-support

As it turns out, on Sosa's views, carrying out the first-order stage of the normative task using (TRA) is doomed to failure for reasons very close to some of those I sketched in the previous section. He says that using (TRA) to show that perception is reliable, or as he prefers to say, that it is a faculty that enjoys a "good epistemic standing", would be hopeless: "We cannot hope to provide a faculty with its required epistemic standing just by drawing the conclusion that it is reliable from a track-record argument based exclusively on data acquired through trusting that very faculty" (2011, p. 140) and that is because "[t]aking the disposition to be reliable is viciously circular if based *just* on the deliverances of that very disposition" (*Ibid*., p. 144, his emphasis), and that is viciously circular because "[o]nly by *supposing* the [disposition] to be reliable… can we properly trust its deliverances" (*Ibid*. p. 143, my emphasis). This is exactly one of the elements in my diagnosis of the previous section: the theorist using the premises of (TRA) in the first-order context needs to assume as positively closed the question whether perception is reliable. To this Sosa only needs to add the observation that this is the very same question that the theorist explicitly pursues as open in that context, and then he could conclude, as I did, that carrying out the first-order stage of the normative task using (TRA) creates an incoherent context of enquiry. But he does not go that far, he stops half way, making the point that using the premises of (TRA) requires assuming that perception is reliable; what matters right now for our purposes is that for him this is enough to make the circularity of (TRA) *vicious*, which means that (TRA) is *incapable to confer justification on (R).*

Sosa rejects (TRA), but he cannot give up on pursuing the normative task, for he still believes that many of our perceptual beliefs are justified and that this is so, in part, because perception is reliable: "Perception is of course reliable", he says, "…. Therefore, the perceivers are right and competent… in their perceptual beliefs" (2009, p. 202). If he thinks he is in a position to make these claims, then he must be able to carry out both the first-order and the second-order stage of the normative task. Given his rejection of (TRA) as a way of carrying out the first-order stage, he must explain what's the alternative.

What can justify or establish (R) if not (TRA)? Sosa's answer to this question is somehow convoluted, as it relies on a distinction between what he calls "reason-involving" (RI) and "non-reason involving" (NRI) competences. He appears to say that perception works sometimes as a RI- and sometimes as a NRI-competence, and that when it works in the latter way it can supply the inputs to justify (R) without relying

on (TRA). There are several clarificatory questions about Sosa's view of perception as a RI- and as a NRI-competence that would need to be answered, but I lack the space to address them here. What I will do is to present his views on these matters in a very concise way that is sufficient to put forward my main contention: whether one conceives of perception as a RI- or as a NRI-competence, one will face a new version of the Conditional Position Problem anyway.

The picture seems to be that the good epistemic standing of RI-competences depends on the good epistemic standing of their "implicit presuppositions required for [their] proper operation" (2011, p. 147), and a central presupposition of those is that the competences are reliable. In contrast, "If *not* reason-involving, an epistemic competence can operate without presupposing its own reliability" (*Ibid*., p. 145), therefore, the epistemic standing of NRI-competences does not derive from the standing of any such presuppositions, and needs to be accounted for differently; we will see in a moment what is Sosa's account.

First, let's take perception to be a RI-competence, then (R) will be one of its "presuppositions" and so perception's epistemic standing will depend on the good epistemic standing of (R): the justification for (R) will be part of what makes perception have a good epistemic standing. This conception of perception would entail that a necessary condition for perception to provide justification (or to have a good epistemic standing) is that one already is justified in believing (R). But this has been thought to be sufficient for transmission-failure to occur[15]; therefore, conceiving perception as a RI-competence will have the effect of making any argument for (R) with empirical premises exhibit transmission-failure. Fortunately, the externalist principles (I) and (II) from Sect. 1 commit our theorist to reject that perception works as a RI-competence: those principles entail that what is necessary for perception to provide justification is that it is reliable, *not* that one is justified in believing that perception is reliable.

Let's now conceive perception as a NRI-competence, what explains its good epistemic standing? Sosa's account is this:

> Competence that is not reason-involving, whose reliable modus operandi may even be sub-personal, depends for its epistemic standing on no justificatory performance by its owner….. What gives it's epistemic standing, moreover, is its animal reliability that enables the harvest of needful information. (*Ibid*. p. 149)

The idea is that what gives perception its good epistemic standing is not that (R) is or can be *justified by the perceiver*, but rather the fact that (R) is *true*. Note that this is in fact entailed by the externalist principles of Sect. 1; hence, our externalist theorist is committed to conceiving perception as an NRI-competence. Of the two conceptions of perception, as a RI- and as an NRI-competence, only the latter is consistent with externalism.

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[15] The idea that transmission-failure occurs when the justification of the premises of a reasoning depends on a prior warrant for the conclusion, is part of Crispin Wright's formulation of the conditions for transmission-failure (see his 2002). After Wright, the conditions for transmission failure have been the subject of complex debates; see for example Neta (2016) and Moretti and Piazza (2013). In the text, I'm using Wright's simple condition merely for illustrative purposes.

Note that in giving the preceding account of the good epistemic standing of perception as a NRI-competence Sosa is using (R) as *his explanans*; this is just the same position he occupies when he uses (R) as an *explanans* for the possibility of perceptually justified beliefs. Indeed, I think both projects (i.e. showing that perception has a good epistemic standing and showing that perception can justify beliefs) are the same normative project under slightly different descriptions. But then, as with the original description of the normative project, Sosa must tell us what is his justification for *his explanans*. We must be very careful here: I'm not requesting *this* justification because I thought that it is *part of* what accounts for the good epistemic standing of perception. That would be conceiving perception as a RI-competence, so conceived it's epistemic standing does depend on the *justification* that is or can be produced for (R); but right now, we are dealing with the hypothesis that perception is a NRI-competence and hence that its good epistemic standing derives just from the *truth* of (R). As before, I am requesting Sosa's justification for (R) simply because any theorist must have a justification for the *explanans* he's putting forward. Now, given that he repudiates (TRA) as a way of getting justification for (R), the question: "what is his justification for (R)?" becomes very pressing.

Sosa thinks there is a justification for (R), available courtesy of conceiving perception as a NRI-competence, which doesn't collapse due to the epistemic vice that he thinks cripples (TRA). He says: "Although our basic competences acquire epistemic status in the [animal-reliability] way explained, this status might still be enhanced with the help of proper reasoning" (2011, p. 141). The "proper reasoning" that he refers to is what I will call "complex self-support", which is arguing for (R) based on scientific evidence concerning the workings of perception. He says that given that perception is "not itself a reason-involving faculty" (*Ibid*., p. 146), vision scientists can uncover

> …the detailed workings of this human faculty: the transfer of light, the rods and cones, the optic nerve, and so on, and so forth. Such discovery of how colour vision works reliably is itself based essentially (not just causally but normatively) on the visual observations of scientists. Again, visual scientists are not plausibly precluded by some worry about vicious circularity from discovering the specifics of how vision works reliably, even if they depend for so doing on the deliverances of vision itself. (*Ibid*. pp. 146–147).

Sosa talks of complex self-support ("CSS", hereafter) as a justification that "enhances" the epistemic standing that perception already has in virtue of merely being animally reliable, but here I will treat it as the justification that he, *as a theorist*, can have to believe that perception is indeed animally reliable. It's clear that if (CSS) successfully plays one role, it also plays the other: a theoretical justification to believe that a competence is reliable makes better the epistemic credentials the competence might already have in virtue of simply being reliable.

If (CSS) is Sosa's justification for (R), there is a concern whether it can perform better than (TRA) in justifying (R), i.e. in carrying out the first-order stage of the

normative task.[16] One initial worry is that Sosa claims that (CSS) should be conceived as obtained under the auspices of the conception of perception as an NRI-competence, but as I pointed out above the externalist theorist is *committed* to conceive of perception as an NRI-competence. Indeed, when we were using (TRA) we were assuming the externalist principles of Sect. 1, we were assuming that what is necessary for the justification of the premises of (TRA) is the truth of (R), not its being justified; hence, when we were using (TRA) we were *already* assuming that perception works as a NRI-competence and despite that we failed in carrying out the normative task. Why should we think that now, working with (CSS), the conception of perception as a NRI-competence would contribute to our success? We will see this worry confirmed in what follows.

A second worry about (CSS)'s capacity to justify one in believing (R) is that, no matter its complexity, it is still a form of *self*-support: the scientific evidence for the reliability of perception is obtained through perception, and as Sosa himself recognizes in the previous quotation, this dependence is not merely causal but also *normative,* it is a *circular normative dependence*. But then, just as the *justification* for the second-conjunct in each premise of (TRA) depends on perception, the *justification* of the information contained in (CSS) also depends on perception. Given Sosa's externalism, this dependence takes the more specific form that the justification of the bodies of data in question depends on perception being reliable. But then it would seem to follow that using (CSS) to argue for (R) is also infected with the epistemic vice that we've seen, at the beginning of the present section, that Sosa imputes to (TRA): just as using the premises of (TRA) to justify (R) already assumes that (R) is the case, using the data comprised in (CSS) to justify (R) also already assumes that (R) is the case. In both cases our justificatory procedure requires assuming what we want to establish with it.

Note that in making this assessment I'm *not* falling back on conceiving perception as a RI-competence: I'm not saying that perception's capacity to provide justification for the information in (CSS) depends on *the justification for* (R); I'm sticking to the idea that perception is a NRI-competence, and hence that it's capacity to provide justification for the information in (CSS) depends merely on *the truth of* (R). This is the circular normative dependence that in the case of (TRA) made it deserve Sosa's rejection, why should its presence in (CSS) not produce the same verdict?

Sosa feels this worry, because after noting the normative dependence of (CSS) on perception, he himself asks the natural question: "What makes this more acceptable that our earlier bootstrapping…… [of which (TRA) is a special case]?" (2011, pp. 151–152, ft. 10). But instead of also disqualifying (CSS) for exhibiting the same normative dependence on the reliability of perception as (TRA), he rather focuses on what he thinks is a good-making property *of both*: coherence. Both forms of reasoning exhibit relations of mutual support: (R)'s being true helps us obtain some data, and this data in turn helps us to support (R), and Sosa thinks that

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[16] I want to call attention to the fact that what Sosa strictly says in the previous quotation is that (CSS) is available, without circularity worries, to the "vision scientist"; but such scientist need not be pursuing the first- and second-order stages of the epistemologist's normative task. Whether the point of the vision scientist's enquiry is well served by (CSS) is not a question important for us; the question important for us is if (CSS) can serve the point of Sosa's normative task of showing that perception enjoys a good epistemic standing, and I'm about to argue in the main text that it doesn't.

> ….mutual support [even in the case of (TRA)] might add epistemic value. Coherence through mutual support seems a matter of degree, and even the minimal degree involved in blatant bootstrapping is not worthless….. Mutually supportive comprehensive coherence is always worth something, even if its value is vanishingly small when it remains this simple (2011, p. 152, ft. 10).

(CSS) might not be different form (TRA) concerning its normative dependence on the reliability of perception, but it is different concerning the degree of comprehensive coherence it exhibits:

> The developing human understanding is thus gradually enhanced. We use our faculties to gain gradually increasing knowledge of our own reliability, of the ways in which, and the extent to which, we are reliable….. [These are]…. enhancements [on the justification for (R)] that derive from increasing richness and from increasing attachments to the world beyond. As the childhood years go by we steadily enrich our comprehensive coherence with more reliable truth-involving connections with our world. (*Ibid*. p. 152)

The idea would be that (CSS) exhibits a much higher degree of mutual support between (R) and the data we can collect courtesy of assuming it, than the degree that (TRA) exhibits, and it is this difference that enables (CSS) to do what (TRA) couldn't: provide (R) with a sound justification.

A question that Sosa does not address is this: the superior degree of mutual support coherence that (CSS) possesses is a *good-making* epistemic property with respect to its capacity to justify (R), but I've called attention to the fact that the normative dependence of (CSS) on the reliability of perception is a *bad-making* property of (CSS) in that same respect. Why should we accept that the good-making property outweights the bad-making property? For the sake of argument, I want to put this problem aside and follow Sosa in his intuition that (CSS) does provide a justification to believe (R) in virtue of its superior comprehensive coherence. This means conceding to Sosa that he has found a way of carrying out the first-order stage of the normative task of showing that perception enjoys a good epistemic standing. Now we must inquire if he can carry out the second-order stage of the task successfully.

Our question is then: how does Sosa know that (CSS) indeed fulfils the conditions for justifying (R) that his own theory sets? The parallel question about (TRA) lead to the Conditional Position Problem, is it any different with (CSS)? It might be thought that to know that (CSS) fulfils the coherence-conditions for justification, perception need not play any justificatory role; our justification to believe that (CSS) fulfils those conditions might be a priori: through our intellect we inspect (CSS) and discover that it possesses the required amount of comprehensive coherence. If this was correct, we could know that (CSS) indeed justifies us in believing (R) without having to assume (R) at any point, simply because perception will not play an epistemic role in our getting that knowledge; therefore, there will be no chance of being trapped in the position that (CSS) justifies us in believing (R) *if* (R) is the case. We would have escaped the Conditional Position Problem.

But we've moved too quickly in the preceding reasoning. The comprehensive coherence that Sosa talks about is a relation that needs *relata* to exist, and in Sosa's

epistemology the coherence capable of generating the sufficient amount of epistemic value needed to put (CSS) well above (TRA), cannot be coherence among just anything that pops-up into one's mind:

> …internal coherence is clearly insufficient. Isn't that obvious in view of paranoia, hypochondria, and similar psychoses? Logical brilliance permits logical coherence but does not even ensure sanity, much less general epistemic aptitude (2009, p. 200).

For (CSS) to deliver the kind of epistemic value or justification Sosa needs from it, the beliefs that constitute the relata in the relations of mutual support that (CSS) exhibits must provide a "reliable access to the world" (2009, p. 190). Therefore, one of the conditions that (CSS) must fulfil, in order to yield the sought justification for (R), is that the beliefs that participate in (CSS) have been formed truth-reliably. So, to know that (CSS) fulfils the conditions for justifying (R) we would have to know that the beliefs in (CSS) have been formed reliably. Given that most of the beliefs in (CSS) are about empirical matters concerning "the transfer of light, the rodes and cones, the optic nerve, and so on" (2011, p. 146), which are discovered through perception, in order to know that those beliefs have been formed reliably we must know that perception is reliable, i.e. we must know (R), and this sets the stage for a reappearance of the Conditional Position Problem.

For the sake of argument let's assume that one knows that (CSS) fulfils any other coherence-condition for supplying justification, that leaves us only with (R). At this point the externalist theorist knows the conditional:

(CP)* *If* (R) then (CSS) gives one justification to believe (R).

Does he know (R)? Given that his way of knowing (R) is (CSS), the answer is that in order to know (R), (CSS) at least has to give him justification to believe (R). But this answer sends him back to the question whether (CSS) indeed gives him justification to believe (R), which is the question that the theorist is pursuing in the present second-order stage of the normative task, and he already knows the answer to it: (CSS) gives him justification to believe (R) *if* (R), which is (CP)* again. This is a new version of the Conditional Position Problem we reached when (TRA) was used to justify (R).

The attempt to get past that conditional position by taking (R) to be directly available for inferential use, without asking first whether one knows it, and then use it together with (CP)* in a *Modus Ponens* to obtain the conclusion that (CSS) gives one justification to believe (R), is subject to the same criticism that I developed in Sect. 4 against the same manoeuvre when (TRA) was the intended way of justifying (R): the manoeuvre produces an incoherent context of enquiry where the question explicitly pursued as open, i.e. whether (CSS) fulfils the conditions to justify (R), is implicitly assumed to be positively closed in the act of taking (R) to be ready for inferential use.

I emphasised earlier that (CSS) exhibits the same normative dependence on the reliability of perception exhibited by the premises of (TRA): in both cases our justification for endorsing the empirical data in question has as a necessary condition that perception is reliable. In Sect. 2, I proposed to proceed as if this circular normative dependence didn't cripple the use of (TRA) to carry out the first-order stage of the nor-

mative task, in order to see if the second-order stage could be carried out successfully. The results were negative. Now we've discovered the same pattern with respect to the use of (CSS): a few paragraphs earlier in the present section I proposed to proceed as if the circular normative dependence of (CSS) didn't cripple its use to carry out the first-order stage, and follow Sosa in his intuition that the comprehensive-coherence of (CSS) is a good-making property that somehow outweighs the bad-making property constituted by the circular normative dependence. The results have been negative again. I think the moral is clear. If we choose to proceed in the first-order stage as if the circular normative dependence that infects both (TRA) and (CSS) was unproblematic, we will, in both cases, stumble upon the Conditional Position Problem when trying to develop the second-order stage; and this will happen because our procedural assumption at the first-order stage was wrong: the circular normative dependence that (TRA) and (CSS) exhibit *is problematic* for the first-order stage in the way I explained in Sect. 4, i.e. it creates an incoherent context of enquiry that demands from us assuming as positively closed a question that is explicitly regarded as open. We have seen how the same type of incoherent context can arise in the second-order stage also, if we try to overcome the Conditional Position Problem through what I've called the *Modus Ponens* strategy. None of these difficulties can be avoided by switching from (TRA) to (CSS), for both contain the seed out which those problems grow: the circular normative dependence on the reliability of perception, which therefore is epistemically vicious.

6 Conclusions

The viciously circular normative dependence found in (TRA) and (CSS) that thwarts the normative task, is not something the externalist can eschew, for it is entailed by the externalist principle (I), from Sect. 1. That principle says that a necessary condition for the instantiation of certain positive epistemic properties is that the beliefs that have them in fact come from a reliable competence. One of such properties is *justification*, and so, for the case of beliefs justified by perception, the principle entails that a necessary condition for them to be justified is that perception is reliable. It follows from this general claim that, in particular, a necessary condition for the premises of (TRA) to be justified is that (TRA)'s conclusion is true. This is what I defined as "epistemic circularity" in Sect. 3 and what, following Sosa, have been calling "circular normative dependence" since Sect. 5.

It would seem then that the only way to carry out the normative task without falling into epistemic circularity is giving up externalism, more precisely, giving up principle (I) of externalism. Abandoning principle (I) is indeed a way of eschewing epistemic circularity when carrying out the normative task. In effect, consider an internalist whose meta-theory of epistemic concepts denies that reliability is necessary for perceptual justification, and instead takes as a necessary condition for such justification some other feature of perception that is "internally accessible" to the subject, for

example the "assertive" quality of perceptual phenomenology.[17] For such internalist the normative task would look very different than the way it looks for the externalist.

In the process of showing that the property *being justified by perception* is instantiated by some beliefs the internalist will no longer have to show that perception is reliable, but instead that the perceptual episodes on which those beliefs are based fulfil the new necessary condition for justification, i.e. that they possess the requisite assertive phenomenology, and he can ascertain that perceptual episodes fulfil this condition without relying on perception. In order to enquire if perception is reliable we have to use perception, but in order to enquire if perception has a certain phenomenological quality we don't use perception but a different competence: introspection. This eliminates epistemic circularity from the normative task: given that the procedure we use to conclude that perception fulfils the phenomenological condition to provide justification is not itself perceptual but introspective, it will not be a necessary condition for that introspective procedure to yield justification that the conclusion we want to reach with it is true.[18] In contrast, this is exactly what happens to (TRA) and (CSS) as used by the externalist: a necessary condition for those procedures to yield justification is that the conclusion he wants to reach with them is true.[19] The internalist's way of carrying out the normative task with respect to perceptual justification may have problems of its own, but epistemic circularity will not be one of them.

The challenge for the externalist is to identify a way of avoiding the pitfalls of epistemic circularity without surrendering his identity, i.e. without surrendering principle (I) of externalism.[20]

Appendix

Stroud and the Conditional Position Problem

In Sect. 1, I pointed out that the Conditional Position Problem [(CPP) hereafter], bears some similarities to a problem that Barry Stroud has tried to formulate, both as a problem for externalism in general (1989) and as a problem for Sosa's externalism in particular (1994, 2004). It will be very instructive to discuss in detail all the features of Stroud's problem that make it different from the (CPP), but here I lack the space to

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[17] Pryor (2000, 2013) defends an internalism of this type. See, for example, his 2013, p. 96.

[18] Of course, the *introspective* competence that we use to ascertain whether perceptual episodes fulfil the phenomenological condition will have to fulfil some necessary conditions of its own to provide justification. What I'm saying is that the condition necessary *for perception* to provide justification will not be one of them.

[19] Note that the internalist can deploy (TRA) and (CSS) *without epistemic circularity*. Given that the reliability of perception is no longer necessary for justification, it will not be necessary for the justification of the perceptual data in (TRA) and (CSS) that their conclusions are true; that data will have to fulfil some internalist conditions to yield justification, but that perception is reliable will not be one of them. However, establishing without circularity that perception is reliable is *of no use* for the internalist in carrying out his normative task, because that perception is reliable is not among the things that he has to show in order to show that beliefs are justified by perception.

[20] I would like to express my gratitude to two anonymous referees of *Synthese* for their comments and criticisms on earlier versions of this paper; and to Elia Zardini for helpful discussion.

do that; what I will do is to bring out one of those features which stands as the clearest sign that the problem he has in mind cannot be the one I have formulated.

Here are two passages where Stroud formulates the problem he sees in a way that makes it sound similar to (CPP):

> 'Externalism' implies that *if* such-and-such is true in the world, *then* human beings do know things about what the world is like…….. even when the antecedent and so the consequent are in fact both true [that] still leaves us always in the disappointingly second-best position I have tried to illustrate… (1994, p. 152. His emphasis)

> The scientific 'externalist' claims to have good reason to believe that his theory is true. It must be granted that *if*, in arriving at his theory, he did fulfil the conditions his theory says are sufficient for knowing things about the world, then if that theory is correct, he does in fact know that it is. But still, I want to say, he himself has no reason to think that he does have good reason to think that his theory is correct. He is at best in the position of someone who has good reason to believe his theory *if* that theory is in fact true….. (1989, p. 118. My emphasis)

The problem he sees has to do with being stranded in a mere conditional statement, unable to get into a position to categorically affirm the consequent. But the conception he has of what it is that originates the problem, sets it in sharp contrast with the (CCP). In particular, Stroud thinks that the problem he sees does *not* arise from the epistemic circularity that infects the externalist's procedures to carry out what I've called the normative task, he writes:

> I believe the kind of theory [Sosa] favours is vulnerable to the difficulty I see. But I do not think it is a question of circularity. As a general objection to the possibility of understanding knowledge, I think the charge of circularity is without force. (2004, p. 165)

He thinks the problem he sees is difficult to convey or express, but he is very sure it doesn't come from epistemic circularity:

> It is admittedly not easy to describe the deficiency in a few words… [but] it is not that there is some internal defect or circularity in the 'externalist' theory… (1994, p. 148).

And again:

> …I don't think circularity is the issue in the plight of Sosa's "externalist" epistemological theorist… (2004, p. 170).

But I made it abundantly clear throughout this paper that the (CPP) *does* arise out of the epistemic circularity exhibited by the procedures that the externalist uses to carry out the normative task. Epistemic circularity is essentially involved in making the (CPP) arise, but given what Stroud says, epistemic circularity is not involved in making the problem he sees arise; this gives us a reason to think that the (CPP) is not the same problem that the one Stroud sees.

However, if one thinks that the same problem can originate in different ways, there is the possibility that Stroud is arguing that the (CPP) arises, not from epistemic circularity but from certain other tenets he associates with externalism. Obviously, this would raise the question whether the externalist is really committed to those tenets. Whether the (CPP) can originate in commitments of the externalist, different form epistemic circularity, would be the topic of a different paper. The aim of this paper would have been reached if I've succeeded in identifying *at least one* way in which the (CPP) arises out of principles that are truly essential for the identity of externalism.

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